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Navigating Anti-racism in an Anti-black Landscape: A Dance Educator's Reflection

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Abstract

In 2022, many are coming to understand that racism is a proverbial pollutant in the water people in the U.S drink. Moreover, it is a toxin all members of a race-based society consume, and all must address. In this paper, I share my reflexive journey facing and dismantling racism in my own teaching praxis—examining ways I have upheld structures of whiteness. I reflect on previous teaching experiences and consider operations of race in the dance classroom from the perspectives of a parent, teacher, and student. I hold space for resistance and consider the real-world motivations around these acts. I support teachers moving forward in the work of dismantling oppressive practices with reflective prompts and an evaluative syllabus tool, offered as resources for those working to reform their teaching.

Introduction

It is the beginning of 2021 and I have questions. Where can I identify whiteness in my teaching, past, present, and future? And how can I undo racism in my classroom? The term “whiteness,” as used in this paper, is a set of “structural arrangements devised to maintain the racial hierarchy that privileges White people, under a guise of neutrality and ‘niceness’” (Castagno, 2014, p. 6). To explore these issues, I draw from research frameworks that affirm reflective and reflexive praxes as research tools for the purpose of positioning the teacher as the “actor,” to learn and improve pedagogy (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). I seek a process of introspection to uncover the implicit bias I sit with in my teaching. Scholar Angela Lisle (2010) writes about the process of an ongoing reflexive practice for the purpose of professional development. Lisle identifies this process as a means to research cognitive growth.

In my continuous labor of doing the “work” to dismantle structures of oppression, I recognize that if I believe in a reflective praxis, I must model it. Herein I differentiate reflective practice and reflexive practice, although both are drawn upon in this paper. My reflections are the experiences from the past that I can look back at and draw information from to inform my teaching in the future. My reflexive practice is a self-disciplined approach to reflection that considers the researcher/teacher’s positionality in the moment, as well as their potential biases and assumptions (Finley, 1998). Through reflexivity I can assess a situation, considering power dynamics, my role, and positionality of all parties. I am able to make the needed shifts to my behavior and approach to be a more responsive and effective teacher. The reflexive practice requires heightened cognitive awareness to respond in real time, as opposed to the reflective practice which centers what can be learned in hindsight. I have also found that in recent years, now that I am a parent, I have an additional angle in which to see and understand as is evident throughout this paper. Through these reflective processes, I have come to see some of my actions in the classroom as enacting whiteness, a realization I could not have come to without a reflective praxis.

I have been teaching for over two decades in the United States. I have taught at the elementary, middle, high school, and university levels, private studio, and public as well as private schools, on the West Coast, East Coast, in the South, as well as currently in the Mid-West. As I reflect, I am thinking of race in America, race in my classrooms (past, present, and future), and race in the life of my child’s educational experience. There are several moments that I came back to in the past year. Each one offering distinct opportunities of learning—I include them here, in this document. This paper also includes several resources for educators “doing the work” of dismantling racism. It offers a series of critical questions to consider for reflection and growth; a list of principles for the anti-racist classrooms; and a bias-assessment tool for evaluating syllabi. While dance is my field of study, I seek resources and information

from a cross sections of fields and believe that the reflective practices described herein, and teacher resources offered, can be useful to all educators.

Lessons Learned Through Reflection

My reflective journey began this summer past, the summer of 2020. I know of few people who could escape this season without the constant conversations, headlines, reflections, mutterings, accusation, and activism about race. In the midst of this, I received an email from a professor I studied with over fifteen years ago, who is like myself, an African American female faculty member. It was a note of encouragement. While we see each other from time to time professionally, we do not keep in touch, but she knows I am the mother of a young Black boy. She wanted me to know that she understood what it was like to navigate the academy and teaching “while parenting a Black child that the world hates.” It stopped me in my tracks as I read her words. To be sure, the racial trauma I experience in the classroom has magnified since becoming a parent. The stakes of educating the next generation feel higher. When a student or colleague makes an off-hand racist comment, it is hard for me not to relate to the words and energy as a part of my child’s world. I had never sat with the idea that the world hated my child; and yet these words could explain so much, particularly in the context of this year’s racially charged social unrest. I recognize this former professor and current mentor/colleague’s actions in reaching out to me as an act of anti-racism, an action designed to work against the operations of race active in my life. Her witnessing, co-signing, and testimony gives voice to experiences not acknowledged in my daily life. This action does a great deal to support and affirm me.

Next, I thought about an experience I had almost over fifteen years ago, within a very different time. I was teaching at a new performing arts high school. The parent of one of my students came up to the school to intimidate me. Her daughter warned me that her mother came to “beat me up.” This parent told me under no uncertain terms, that her child was not a “ballet girl” she was a “hip-hop girl,” and she made it clear to me that she did not like the conservatory-based curriculum I had been required to teach. At the time, I thought this parent was ignorant to dance and thus was unable to see the value of dance “training.” While I do not think there is a place for violence in schools, today, as a parent, I understand what it feels like when the esteem of the person you treasure most is threatened at the hands of a person who represents a system and structure that has oppressed many outside the dominant culture.

My dance training indoctrinated me into an ideology that values the pointed foot over the flexed foot and to be sure, this ideology values ballet and modern—Western and traditionally White dance aesthetics, over hip hop and other dance forms derived from African-based dance characteristics, characteristics outlined by Glass (2012) and Welsh (1990). This ideology is implicitly disseminated and widely spread throughout mainstream America and the world. It is why most of the first-year college students I have encountered throughout my career believe

that ballet is the foundation of dance (McCarthy-Brown & Schupp, 2018). When asked to critically think about this narrative, many students realize that it is a flawed paradigm but seem too deeply invested in it to shift any of their behaviors that display this value system. This value system was so deeply ingrained in me that I did not see how oppressive pushing a ballet and modern curriculum on a hip-hop dancer was (is).

Today I know that it was me who was ignorant during that parent teacher exchange years ago. I did not see the value of my student's embodied knowledge, which was quite unique, outstanding, and memorable. Today, as the parent of a Black, male, fourth grader, I understand the disempowered feeling when your child's culture and embodied identity is diminished before your eyes. I have witnessed the joy of my ancestors expressed in the syncopated organized movement of my child. Then, saw that embodied culture and sense of joy be squelched and deemed worthy of exclusion by a teacher—it is an act of racial violence. I came to this visceral understanding on two occasions. My son asked me to tell his teacher it was Black History Month (once in pre-school and once in second grade). Both times I dismissed his concerns and assured him that his teachers knew it was Black History Month. In addition, I sent books and materials to support instruction—just in case. On both occasions my son informed me the books and materials were not used. It was not until after the second incident, when I found unused supplies at the bottom of a classroom supply closet, when volunteering in the classroom, that I realized my son accurately intuited his class culture as established by his teacher. To be sure, most people have a good sense of when they are safe to bring their whole self to a space, and when they do not. His teachers were always kind and nice, as operations of whiteness work (Castagno, 2014). They showered him with statements of how much they love all their students and that everyone is equal, and he basked in their kindness. Yet, they did not open space for my son to bring his full self into the classroom, which included his race, and to feel affirmed in his identity that went beyond their purview (Gay, 2010; Delpit, 1990). The dismissal of BIPOC children's sense of alienation is often downplayed in schools. (Delpit, 1990). Still, it was painful for me to recognize and acknowledge that I was the perpetrator of this action toward my own son—dismissing his concerns that his teachers did not know Black people are amazing and should be celebrated, at a minimum during Black History Month.

Teaching Through Resistance

If we want to do the work of dismantling oppressive structures, we must be honest and understand that equity means a redistribution of power, resources, affirmation, focus of curriculum study, etc. For those accustomed to having a focus on their culture and strengths, equity can feel like a loss—even for those who believe in the concept. Resistance to this work of dismantling oppressive structures is real, and although painful at times, it can also be a source of fuel.

I am reflecting on one of my “Teaching Methods” classes where diversity, equity, and inclusion were explored, and I witnessed student resistance. During one discussion, a White female student, I will call her Lisa, explained to the class that she did not see the point of diversity and inclusion work because it made everyone feel uncomfortable and created awkward moments. She went on to say that when she started the dance program at the university, she was frustrated by all the African-based classes. She compared her training up to this point to a board game where she had set up all her pieces, done everything she was supposed to do, and had worked really hard. Then someone came along and slammed down all the pieces on her board—destroying everything. It was a powerful and honest statement that stayed with me. It is also an example of “resistance to content...a complex and uncomfortable form of resistance,” often expressed in “anger avoidance or silence” (Jackson, 1999, p. 29).

This student also admitted that she benefited from the diversification of her dance studies. However, Lisa’s comment about training harkens back to my previous example of being challenged by a parent and my inability to see the beauty of my student’s embodied knowledge because it was beyond the scope of my own knowledge. Lisa was conflicted, she acknowledged the value of diversified studies, but did not like feeling as though she was not an expert, in a space where she had planned and expected to be an expert. Moreover, if Lisa expressed value for this knowledge, which was beyond anything she knew, beyond her “training,” how could she still hold her position as an accomplished dancer? This new paradigm she was being offered did not value her as one of the best dancers in the room, it did not point back to all of her embodied knowledge.

Over time, we came to a space that accepted it did not have to be “either I’m a good dancer (Western dancers) or you’re a good dancer (African-based dancers)” it could be, “we both possess training and knowledge.” Yet in class discussions student after student laments how and why it took so long to get the information that diversity is valuable. This delay in information made it arduous for students to work through a calcified worldview that centers Western and privileged dance forms. This understanding drives me to advocate for culturally responsive and diverse dance education (McCarthy-Brown, 2009). Students who learn these values earlier will then not have to go through such jarring worldview shifts in order to see the value in all people and their dances.

Also inspiring me are the experiences that I know I need to provide, that de-center whiteness, and uplift BIPOC students. Often these experiences are a mirror showing me the work that I still need to do. In this instance, I was able to identify and respond to the racial dynamics operating in real time—a reflexive moment. In 2019, I choreographed a dance piece that featured movements of the African Diaspora, and I negotiated the space constantly to affirm the African American student in the piece while expanding the offerings and embodied

knowledge of the five other students who were primarily Western trained—four of whom were White. In this incident, some of the White students complained of discomfort and challenges with the unfamiliar movement. I negotiated movement and made accommodations throughout. The African American student, in response to my “negotiations” found a diplomatic way to say, “I feel at home, finally, as a senior, I feel I am in this movement,” she stated while strutting like a peacock. She continued, “when I am challenged by the [Western-based] movements we do all the time in this department, when I feel uncomfortable, instructors show little interest and do not shape shift movement for me.” In this moment, I felt called out...and proud of my student for her critical observation of whiteness enacted in her learning space. I agreed, with her, affirmed the comment, and carried on with rehearsal. The conversation stayed with me, and I have come back to it many times.

I recognize the ways I tip-toe around the structures of whiteness embedded in my workspace and livelihood. Some of this behavior is learned and unconscious. There are other moments when I am hyper aware of the hard and calculated work it takes on my part. I try not to challenge or upset students too much. I feel as if I can only confront so much racism and colonization in one day of class. As I unpack these class experiences, I relate it to the scholarship of Angela Castagno, whose description of whiteness includes: “The function of whiteness is to maintain the status quo, and although White people most often benefit from whiteness, some people of color have tapped into the ideological components of whiteness for their own financial and educational benefits” (2014). To be sure, I feel that my right to freedom, the pursuit of happiness, and more directly, my ability to be employed, is connected to my willingness to collude with whiteness. The structures of institutional racism are inclusive of mechanisms of interdependence. My position in the academy is dependent on the positioning of the academy within our society. I am aware of my transgressions as an ignorant (at times) and compromised teacher. This awareness fuels my growth and purpose to be a more culturally responsive, and anti-racist dance educator each day. I work continuously to inspire the field of dance education to be more inclusive, to see each child and their embodied history and future. My experiences in the classrooms as a teacher and the ones I witness my child experiencing, remind me daily of the significance of this work.

Critical Considerations

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work must be done with critical and ongoing reflection of what is being included and what is not. In a personal conversation about inclusion with my colleague, Assistant Professor of Dance, Kemal Nance, he addressed some of the problems with “inclusion” work. Nance stated, “inclusion is not all good, if you include everything, that includes anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, homophobia, all the negative and divisive ills of society as well” (Nance, 2020). Thus, deep thought about who and what is included is crucial. Reflection is powerful and drives the self-awareness to make changes to increase student

learning (Hall & Simeral, 2017). It is an invaluable tool in doing “the work” of anti-racism. albeit one must move beyond this opening step to action to dismantle structures and systems of oppression. All improvements in this work begin with the self and understanding how our identity radiates from us and shines light and/or casts shadows over others in the space.

I have been facilitating conversations on racism in dance for several years. In the past year, since the killing of George Floyd, I have been asked for materials and resources to share with teachers more than ever. Below is a series of considerations I developed as a tool to reflect upon as a component of diversity, equity, and inclusion work. These questions are informed by diversity mapping exercises (Hurtado & Halualani, 2014) as well as widely accepted scholarship in the field that orients work in this area to begin with the self and one’s own identity (Michael, 2015; Sue, 2015; Saad, 2020; Jewell, 2020; White, 2012). I work from the United States, a race-based society built on Christianity. When I reference the “mainstream” I am referring to a White, Christian, and middle-class lens that is widely accepted as informing the mainstream in the United States. However, the mainstream is different, in different locations and communities throughout the world.

Series of Considerations

Examining the self:

- Who are you?
- How do you see yourself within the following identity markers? Race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, language, nationality, abled-body, neuro-diverse/neuro-typical. Are there other identity markers, visible or invisible that make you who you are?
- Who are your closest five friends?
- Who do you follow on social media (not including public figures)?
- What were the last five books you read, the last three movies you saw, and three genres you gravitate toward when selecting television entertainment?
- Consider your web of connections, who are you most likely to advocate for? Who are you least likely to advocate for? And why?

Many members of historically marginalized groups often feel alienated or disconnected in educational spaces. Reflect for a moment on your connection to the following groups: first generation college students of color, LBGTQIA+ community members, working class folks, immigrants, continuing/returning education students, diverse language learners, and students with religious faiths outside of a Christian mainstream (Garriot, 2019; Brandle, 2020). Now think about your class curriculum. How invested are you in making sure that all students can relate to the curriculum, or can see themselves in their educational experience? Are White students instilled with the skills they will need to engage people who come from backgrounds different from their own? Do you think White students are offered an education that they can

see themselves in more, less, or the same as students from different backgrounds? Do you think White students walk into class knowing that their educational history and where they come from is of value in their educational setting? Do you think Muslim students come in with this same feeling of value? Do you think African American students, or Latinx students come into class with the same sense of value?

Students need both windows and mirrors (Huber-Kriegler et al., 2003), and teachers need to be mindful of how those two are balanced or disproportionate. How are students helped or harmed by mirrors? How are students helped or harmed by windows? Mirrors support students' self-esteem, sense of well-being, and belief that they are valuable and can contribute greatness to our community. Without mirrors students can feel devalued and may get the sense that they do not belong. With a curriculum that only reflects one's own cultural identity, students can get a false sense of internalized superiority and be unable to relate to those from different backgrounds. Windows provide students with expanded vision for what's possible, and help students understand the world beyond their experience in it. Yet, a curriculum with only windows can communicate that the students' culture is not worthy of learning about and is unimportant. This can leave students feeling rudderless and without roots to ground them. Thus, balancing windows and mirrors requires intentional work and planning.

If you look around the studio (or classroom), and take an inventory of the print, image, and internet resources you point students toward, which students are offered mirrors to see and affirm their identity and which students are offered windows to see and understand other lived experiences? In my work as a facilitator of workshops to develop teaching tools for dance educators, I created a framework for anti-racist classrooms. I ask teachers to consider how they can create class culture, activities, class rituals, and exercises with these anti-racist teaching principles in mind. *(This is a loose structure to be modified and adapted for teachers' use).*

1. Teachers must re-evaluate their curriculum through a critical pedagogy lens.
2. Students need to understand privilege and be encouraged to rethink power.
3. Interrupt whiteness (and how it functions as an unstated universal norm) and the marginalization and invisibilization of people of color (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019, p. 42).
4. Look for opportunities to affirm and build up those who are often under-affirmed.
5. Work to understand racial trauma, acknowledge that racial trauma lives in the body and offer opportunities for healing in the body (van der Kolk, 2015). This includes empowering students with choice, moments to reflect on how their body feels, how their being feels, and how feelings sit in the body (Menakem, 2017). Show students racial resilience and collective resilience, these are components of racial healing.

- Teach students that emotions can be expressed physically and that they modulate and change; they are not stagnate. This also means that one's pain is not stagnate and can change and heal (Duggan, 2020). Teach students about joy and rejoice in collective healing. Provide space for this and create space for students to witness resilience (Menakem, 2017; Duggan, 2020).
6. Commit to a reflective practice and take responsibility to understand personal bias, where and how it shows up in your teaching practice.
 7. When you witness racism, say something. To be silent is to be complicit and contributes pain to the injured party. Let those that are oppressed by racism know that that you see the structures of oppression. Acknowledge that the stance of oblivion contributes to racial trauma (Duggan, 2020; Menakem, 2017).
 8. Be proactive about how to handle racial or other identity-based conflict in the classroom. Empower students with the tools to address harmful words, behaviors, and microaggressions. Create a protocol that students can use.

Such as:

- I heard you say _____ and it made me feel _____.
- Thank you for letting me know what you heard and how it made you feel.
I receive your words and feelings. I am going to think through this today and moving forward.

As a community of educators, we do the “work,” of anti-racism in many ways, one of which is developing syllabi. I developed a tool for syllabus assessment, based on The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center’s 2017, “Assessing Bias in Standards and Curriculum,” assessment tool. They developed a fantastic assessment tool, free and available on the world wide web.-This tool was designed to assess standards and curriculum, yet I found it difficult to use with a syllabus. For example, the assessment tool asks one to examine standards, but these are not always present in a syllabus. It also asks if the content material whitewashes historic events, something that one cannot always discern from a syllabus, but often would require an examination of the actual content materials. In addition, for a course centered on process, such as dance composition, this criterion would need to change. For a composition course one might examine if all the taught choreographic tools were Western-based/Western-informed and if so, was this explicitly stated in the syllabus? In such an instance one might also encourage instructors to include choreographic approaches from diverse cultural lenses. For the purpose of sharing resources widely, and after obtaining consent from the center about using the resource tool, I have included my adapted syllabus assessment tool in the appendix.

Closing

I have offered a number of critical reflections that have expanded my understanding of how race operates in the dance classroom. It is my hope that my experiences inspire readers to reflect on how race is operating in your classroom. Today, as a result of ongoing reflexive

practice for the purpose of improvement, I intimately understand the sentiments of the parent that approached me about the ballet curriculum I was teaching, and I appreciate her. I consider what I would have done if I were that parent whose amazing dancing child was coming home from school with a lowered self-esteem, feeling that the dances that their body had (earned and) possessed were “less than.” Today, I dare anyone to tell my son, an accomplished beautiful b-boy, that the dances he delights in do not “belong.” They are a part of who he is.

As I teach each day with an anti-racist agenda, I also witness the anti-blackness in the room that I tirelessly push against. It is the same anti-blackness that my student expressed when the pieces on her boardgame moved without her consent. It is the same anti-blackness that the former parent witnessed when her child was required to center ballet in her studies. It is the same anti-blackness that I pushed against when my son tells me that his teacher will not let him include his dances in the category of American culture. It is the same anti-blackness that some of my students embody when they feel discomfort in their bodies, when exploring African movement vocabulary. It is the same anti-blackness that my former professor intuited I would be experiencing, as she had, in a field where few of my colleagues are navigating the same space, working in the academy, and parenting a Black child. These reflections and many more give purpose and inform my actions to dismantle insidious structures of whiteness in the dance classroom. As we continue the work of dismantling systems of oppression, I ask you to stop, reflect on your “why,” and move forward in informed action.

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Appendix

Bias - Assessment Tool for Evaluating a Syllabus (in terms of DEI)

Please note: This tool is designed to point out the strengths and weaknesses of a given syllabus. No one barometer can measure everything. In addition, this tool does not take into account how far a course may have come in its development of inclusive content. This tool mines for areas where growth is needed. Absence of a criteria factor does not make a course “bad” or its instructor “bad.” All content and instructors are developing with their fields and evolving with society.

In addition, you may find that some of the questions in this assessment tool are not applicable to the given syllabus or topic area, or not enough information has been given for you to conclude. In these instances, please write in N/A or N/I (not enough information).

Name of course syllabus: _____

- 1) Does this syllabus include perspectives from the following historically marginalized groups?

| Marginalized group | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| African American | | |
| Asian | | |
| Latinx | | |
| Native American | | |
| Women in leadership | | |
| LBGTQIA+ community members | | |
| Non-Christian views (Muslim, Hindu, or other) | | |
| Indigenous views and knowledge | | |
| English as a second language and immigrant communities | | |
| Working class perspective | | |

- 2) Count all of the listed required readings, viewings, and listening (if applicable) assignments. Make an estimation of how much content sits in each category. The number does not have to equal out to the same as the number of texts—intersectionality is valued.

| Historically Marginalized Group | Number of texts |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
|---------------------------------|-----------------|

| | (including videos/audio files) |
|--|--------------------------------|
| African American | |
| Asian | |
| Latinx | |
| Native American | |
| White/Caucasian | |
| Women in leadership | |
| LBGTQIA+ community members | |
| Non-Christian views (Muslim, Hindu, or other) | |
| English as a second language and immigrant communities | |
| Working class perspective | |

- 3) Does the language in the syllabus suggest that there is one way to think about a process?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
| | |

- 4) Does the syllabus point to Euro-centered or Western informed criteria or processes, and frame them as universal?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
| | |

- 5) Does the syllabus offer space and possibility for physical disabilities, atypical learners, and/or neurodiversity? Are atypical learners positioned for success? If yes, how so?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
| | |

- 6) Does the course content or course objectives require students to consider what perspectives or bodies were not included in certain topics or eras covered?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
| | |

- 7) Does this syllabus present history (or dances, or dance making devices) from the perspective of multiple groups of people?

| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
| | |

- 8) Does the content “feature” or isolate stories of marginalized groups; or center their stories as part of a general, encompassing narrative. (This is a complicated thing to assess with just the syllabus in hand but try).

| Center stories | Feature/isolate |
|----------------|-----------------|
| | |

- 9) Does the course reflect the historical perspectives and lenses of multiple, diverse groups of people through acknowledging the narratives and counter-narratives of diverse groups of people? (Is there more than one African American or Latinx perspective?)

| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
| | |

- 10) Does the course content avoid using language that suggests groups of people were order-less or uncivilized than Euro-Americans? (This one will likely be too challenging to assess but is valuable to consider and mine for.)

| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
| | |

- 11) Does the course content avoid using language that suggests specific groups of people needing “saving” or “help,” from another group (holding power)? (This one will likely be too challenging to assess but is valuable to consider and mine for.)

| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
| | |

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